Learning Dependency Upon God:
The Exercise of Faith in the Life of Elijah

*"By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going" (*Hebrews 11:8).

Introduction

In the opening verses of 1 Kings 17, we are introduced to a prophet whose passion for God's honor and glory is evident from the moment he speaks. Elijah appears before King Ahab and, according to the covenant curses in Deuteronomy 11:16–17, pronounces divine judgment on Israel for its idolatry. He tells the king that there will be neither dew nor rain except at his word. It is a bold and fearless statement, marking Elijah as a man driven by a deep desire for Jehovah's glory. However, after making that declaration, Elijah faces an immediate and practical challenge. What should he do next? Where should he go? How will he survive in a land that will soon experience the full impact of the drought he has just declared?

The answer God provided, and Elijah's response to it, form the focus of this study. The main idea running through 1 Kings 17 is learning to depend on God through faith. We will see that the time between Elijah's appearance before Ahab in chapter 17 and his dramatic encounter on Mount Carmel in chapter 18 was not wasted. It was a period of intentional preparation, during which God was quietly but crucially shaping His servant. The experiences of that time, though strange and challenging, were meant to teach Elijah, and through him, us, what it means to trust God completely.

In the Word of God, a pattern of divine preparation through a season of seclusion or hardship is not unique to Elijah. Joseph spent years in an Egyptian prison before God elevated him to save Jacob's family. Moses spent a third of his life in the desert of Midian before God sent him back to lead Israel out of Egypt. David fled through the wilderness for years, hunted by King Saul, before rising to the throne. The Apostle Paul withdrew to Arabia after his conversion and spent a considerable amount of time before going to Jerusalem, where he met with Peter and James. It was only then that he took up his public ministry. In every case, God used a period of apparent obscurity and hardship to deepen His servant's faith and reliance before increasing their usefulness. Elijah's experience in chapter 17 follows this same pattern of divine work.

The Commands of God

The story of chapter 17 follows a three-part pattern that repeats twice. First, God tells Elijah to go to a specific place. Second, Elijah follows the command. Third, God shows He is faithful to His promise linked to the command. Keeping this pattern in view helps us follow what God was doing in those months.

In 1 Kings 17, verses 2–4 record the first command. God instructed Elijah to leave Samaria, where he was likely after his encounter with Ahab, and to travel east to a specific ravine called Kerith, near the Jordan River. There, he was to hide, and God promised that the brook in that ravine would supply him with water, and that ravens would bring him food. Verses 8–9 describe the second command. When the brook at Kerith dried up, God spoke again and directed Elijah to Zarephath, a city in Sidon, where a widowed woman had been instructed to care for him.

We might ask why the Lord would send Elijah away from the king's presence altogether. Several reasons come to mind. The most immediate was his protection. Verse 3 instructs him specifically to hide, and given what we know of Jezebel's fierce hatred for the prophets of the Lord (1 Kings 18:13), staying in Samaria would have been extremely dangerous. As the drought worsened and its effects intensified, Ahab's anger would also have been directed at the man responsible for it, as 1 Kings 18:10 clearly states. A second reason is hinted at by Arthur Pink, who sees Elijah's hiding as a form of further judgment upon Israel. Pink writes,

> Once it be recognized that next to the bestowment of His Word and the Holy Spirit to apply the same, the most valuable gift He grants any people is the sending of His own qualified servants among them, and that the greatest possible calamity which can befall any land is God's withdrawal of those whom He appoints to minister unto the soul, then no uncertainty should remain. The drought on Ahab's kingdom was a Divine scourge and in keeping therewith the Lord bade His prophet 'get thee hence.' The removal of the ministers of His truth is a sure sign of God's displeasure, a token that He is dealing in judgment with a people who have provoked Him to anger.[1]

Roger Ellsworth also emphasizes this point with clarity. He describes what he calls the calamity of the secluded word, arguing that the prophet of God symbolizes the Word of God, and

[1] Arthur W. Pink, *The Life of Elijah* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), 31–32.

that Elijah's being hidden from Israel was itself a sign of divine wrath. Ellsworth writes, "Elijah was hidden not for his own sake but for Israel's. By hiding Elijah, the Lord was depriving his people of the Word of God and showing them they were under his wrath and sore displeasure."[2]

This is a sobering thought and a serious matter. The shortage of faithful, qualified preachers of God's Word is more than just a logistical problem for the church. It may sometimes serve as a form of judgment. The weak spiritual condition of many congregations, where the Word of God is rarely taught and seldom heard in its fullness, should concern everyone who loves Christ and the Word of God. Israel in Elijah's time was experiencing not only a physical drought of rain but also a spiritual drought of the Word, and both were signs of the same divine displeasure.

A third reason for Elijah's departure was simply practical. Since the drought was contingent upon his word, as 17:1 makes clear, pressure from the people to intercede and ask God for rain would have been relentless. A fourth reason, most relevant to our theme, was that God sent Elijah into the wilderness for His servant's own training and growth in faith. The conditions of his sojourn were likely to teach him his utter dependence on the Lord.

The specific circumstances God arranged for Elijah at each location were designed to press his faith to the limit. The journey from Samaria to the Kerith Ravine would have taken him through wilderness country. Once there, he was to depend upon ravens for his food. Ravens were listed among the unclean birds in the Law of Moses, creatures considered detestable and not to be eaten (Leviticus 11:13–15). For a faithful Israelite to receive his daily bread from such a source would have required a setting aside of natural dislike in obedience to the plain word of God. And the brook itself, in a land under the sentence of drought, was bound to run dry, as eventually it did. Then, when the brook failed, God sent him not to some safe and friendly location but to Zarephath of Sidon, the center of Baal worship and the homeland of Jezebel herself. There he was to be dependent upon a widowed Gentile woman who, when he arrived, was gathering sticks to prepare what she believed would be the last meal for herself and her son before they starved.

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[2]Roger Ellsworth, *Standing for God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994), 25.

It is important to remember what James tells us: Elijah was a man of like nature with us. We should honestly ask ourselves how we would have responded to such a sequence of instructions. Trusting God in theory is one thing; trusting Him when the command contradicts our natural instincts and reasonable calculations is another. As Pink writes of this time in Elijah's experience, "Elijah was bidden to trust God contrary to sight, to reason, to all outward appearances, to rest in the Lord Himself and wait patiently for Him."[3]

This is exactly what biblical faith looks like in practice. Hebrews 11:1 defines it as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." That was exactly the faith Abraham exercised when he obeyed the call of God and went out, "not knowing where he was going" (Hebrews 11:8). A simple definition of faith means taking the bare Word of God and acting upon it because it is the Word of God, believing what God says solely because He said it. That is what Elijah was being called to do. Perhaps if he had weighed all the difficulties and calculated all the risks, his faith would have collapsed before he took his first step. But God's commands carry with them His promise of provision, and it is on that promise that faith rests.

Elijah's Response: The Obedience of Faith

What immediately stands out in the narrative is Elijah's lack of hesitation. When God told him to go to Kerith, 17:5 simply states that "he did what the Lord had told him." When God directed him to Zarephath, 17:10 is equally concise: "so he went to Zarephath." There is no recorded complaint, no request for clarification, no negotiation, and no delay. The contrast with the prophet Jonah, who, upon receiving his divine mission, quickly fled in the opposite direction, could hardly be clearer. Elijah obeyed God's direction without any apparent hesitation. Arthur Pink offers his observations on Elijah's obedience during this time. He writes,

> This was indeed a severe testing of Elijah, not only to take a long journey through the desert but to enter into an experience which was entirely opposed to his natural feelings, his religious training and spiritual inclinations, to be made dependent upon a Gentile in a heathen city. He was required to leave the land of his fathers and sojourn at the headquarters of Baal-worship. Let us duly weigh this truth that God's plan for Elijah demanded from him unquestioning obedience. They who would walk with God must not only trust Him implicitly but be prepared to be entirely regulated by His Word. Not only must our faith be trained by a great variety of providences, but our obedience by the Divine

[3]Pink, *The Life of Elijah*, 39.

> commandments. Vain is it to suppose that we can enjoy the smile of Jehovah unless we be in subjection to His precepts. 'Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams,' 1 Sam. 15. 22. Directly we become disobedient our communion with God is broken and chastisement becomes our portion.[4]

This promptness in obedience is itself a significant spiritual quality. Psalm 119:60 captures it well: "I hasten and do not delay to keep your commandments." Charles Bridges, in his classic exposition of that Psalm, comments with great clarity on the importance of this disposition. Writing a word to the believer in Christ, he says, "promptness is a most important exercise of the habit of faith. Delay brings guilt to the conscience, the comfortable sense of acceptance, the freedom of the Lord's service, the blessing of conviction, is sacrificed to sloth and procrastination."[5]

When the Scriptures direct us to a particular course of action, we cannot defer it to a more convenient season. The conviction that moves us today may not be equally vivid tomorrow.

It is also important to recognize that Elijah's obedience did not guarantee freedom from hardship. He obeyed God's word and went to Kerith, and the brook dried up. He obeyed God's word and went to Zarephath, and the widow he found there could barely support herself. In the chapters that follow, her son would die. Obedience to God is not a guarantee for a trouble-free life. There is a tendency among believers to assume that something must not be the will of God because circumstances are unfavorable.

What obedience does, over time, is deepen faith and heighten our sense of how fully we depend on God in everything. Elijah, like us, had to learn again and again that God is enough to meet every need in every circumstance, and Scripture teaches that this lesson is learned through life's trials. Pink comments on the relationship between obedience, difficulty, and the strengthening of our faith. He writes,

> Why does God suffer the brook to dry up? To teach us to trust in Himself, and not in His gifts. As a general rule He does not for long provide for His people in the same way and by the same means, lest they should rest in *them* and expect help from them. Sooner or later God shows us how dependent we are upon *Himself*

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[4]Pink, *The Life of Elijah*, 55–56.

[5]Charles Bridges, *An Exposition of Psalm 119* (repr.; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 150.

> ever for the supplies of every-day mercies. But the heart of the prophet must be tested, to show whether his trust was in Cherith or in the living God. So it is in His dealings with us. How often we *think* we are trusting in the Lord, when really we are resting on comfortable circumstances; and when they become uncomfortable, how much faith have we?[6]

The Apostle Paul understood this dynamic well. In the opening of his letter to the Romans, he describes the purpose of his apostolic mission as calling people from among the Gentiles to "the obedience of faith" (Romans 1:5). True biblical faith, he understood, is not merely knowledge and understanding. It expresses itself in a life ordered by submission to the Word of God. What Elijah displays in chapter 17 is precisely this obedience that comes from faith, and it is the very thing God was cultivating in him through the circumstances he endured.

The Faithfulness of God

The third element of the pattern throughout chapter 17 is the most encouraging of all: God's faithfulness to fulfill every promise He made to Elijah. Verse 6 simply states that the ravens brought Elijah bread and meat every morning and evening, and that he drank from the brook. Verse 10 describes how the widow was gathering sticks at the city gate just as Elijah arrived. God was faithful. Hebrews 10:23 wonderfully states the principle: "for he who promised is faithful."

The faithfulness of God is not just a theological idea. It is a real experience for those who trust in Him. For the believer, trust in the Lord builds over time. Every time Elijah saw God keep His promise, his confidence in God's future faithfulness grew stronger. The story in chapter 17 carefully shows this growth in faith. When the widow told Elijah that she only had a little flour and oil left, in fact enough for one last meal, Elijah's response showed how much his faith had already grown. Instead of doubting or giving up, he spoke confidently: "And Elijah said to her, 'Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth.'" (1 Kings 17:13–14). And the Lord was faithful to that promise, as verses 15 and 16 show.

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[6]Pink, *The Life of Elijah*, 50.

Later, when the widow's son fell ill and died, Elijah took the boy to his room and prayed earnestly to the Lord. God responded, restoring the boy's life, and Elijah returned him to his mother alive (1 Kings 17:21–22). Each experience built upon the last, deepening the trust God was cultivating in Elijah's heart and readying him for what lay ahead.

The Word of God in Action

Roger Ellsworth draws four observations from 1 Kings 17 that serve as a fitting conclusion to our study. First, there is what he calls the calamity of the secluded word. God's judgment upon Israel took the form not only of physical drought but of spiritual famine, as the prophet who represented the Word of God was hidden from the people. Many people think of divine judgment in outward and dramatic terms, yet the withholding of God's Word and the shortage of faithful preaching are themselves solemn signs of His displeasure. Might this help explain the scarcity of gifted, qualified preachers who proclaim the whole counsel of God?

Second, there is the certainty of the sustained word. The Lord preserved Elijah at Kerith and at Zarephath, and in so doing demonstrated that He will always sustain His Word for His own purposes and for His own glory. The history of the Christian church confirms this pattern in the most dramatic ways. In the darkest periods of ecclesiastical history, when it seemed as though the truth might be extinguished altogether, God preserved it. The Word of God endures because it is the Word of God!

Third, Elijah's going to Zarephath illustrates that God actively uses His Word. The writer to the Hebrews describes it as "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). The Word of God goes where God purposes it to go, and it accomplishes what He intends it to accomplish. Isaiah expresses this with great beauty when God declares that His word "shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11).

Elijah did not travel to Zarephath because it seemed a promising destination. He obeyed because God had sent him, and God sent him because His powerful, life-giving Word had vital work to do there. In the account of Elijah staying with the widow, we learn a profound lesson:

the Word of God is actively at work, igniting faith in the heart of a Gentile woman who had no prior claim to Israel's covenant promises.

Fourth, and most concerning, is the judgment on those who possess the Word of God and reject it. The widow was a Gentile. Israel was entrusted with God's Holy Word, saw His works, and yet turned away in contempt and unbelief. To those who have been given much, much is expected. Because Israel failed to obey, the Word and its blessings were given to others. This pattern was fully demonstrated in the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ and still serves as a warning to any generation that takes its spiritual privileges for granted.

Conclusion

The events Elijah experienced in 1 Kings 17, from the Kerith Ravine to the widow's house in Zarephath, were a time of obscurity by any outward standard. He was hidden, dependent, and seemingly removed from any visible influence. But God was doing a great work during those quiet months. He was teaching His servant to trust Him fully and to obey His word without delay. Like us, Elijah learned through experience what it means to be dependent on God's faithfulness. James tells us that Elijah was a man just like us. Since that is true, then the same God who trained Elijah in the school of faith is the same God who trains us there as well. The circumstances are different, but the curriculum is not!